

Inquiring Systems

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“... an inquiring system has no safe and assured pathway ahead.”

C. West Churchman

Introduction

The notion of governance has helped to identify the broad set of challenges that confront one in designing suitable stewardship for hybrid organizations or broader socio-technical systems in a fractious and turbulent modern world. It has also led to enlightening explorations into the causes and sources of pathologies in the private, public, and social sectors,¹ and to some useful probing into the features of effective collaborative decentred metagovernance regimes in all those domains.²

However, the approaches to governance in good currency fail to define precise ways to design effective inquiring and ‘wayfinding’ systems as the foundations of stewardship capable of ensuring the requisite social learning and the needed collaboration. In particular, they underestimate the central importance of developing a repertoire of tools and affordances to bolster the dynamic collaborative process of monitoring, reflection,

¹ Gilles Paquet. 2004. *Pathologies de gouvernance*. Montréal: Liber.

² Gilles Paquet. 2011. *Gouvernance collaborative: un antimanuel*. Montréal: Liber.

and self-adjustment that is needed to provide the requisite trust, process guidance, learning, and innovation.

The collaborative decentred metagovernance approach adds value by attempting to develop such a toolbox. It helps practitioners experiment with various protocols in the construction of collaborative regimes capable of ensuring shared learning, commitment, and stewardship. It has done so by recombining the whole range of mechanisms that have proved useful in the private, public, and social sectors in new innovative ways that align better with the turbulent and chaotic environment of modern organizations, and with the new pluralism of values and beliefs characteristic of diverse populations and stakeholders.

Until now, initiatives on this front have been constrained by three major and inter-related handicaps:

- (1) a tendency to wallow in the oversimplified stylizations of complex governance systems that were designed for well-structured and stylized problems;
- (2) a reluctance to abandon those worn-out conventional methods (because of the intellectual capital already invested in them) even when they have proven most unhelpful in dealing with the ill-structured problems generated by complex systems and no-one-is-in-charge type organizations; and
- (3) a propensity to slip into fanciful thinking when it comes to defining the way in which collaboration will materialize – frequently being satisfied to presume that it will come forth automatically, without clearly explaining how it will emerge, or how one can catalyze and nudge this process ahead. This naïve willingness to assume that collaboration will emerge spontaneously, as if by some form of immaculate conception, is so widespread that it led the former US Surgeon General, Jocelyn Elders, to remind all (not without a bit of irony)

that, *de facto*, collaboration continues to be seen “as an un-natural act between non-consenting adults”.³

Our view is that, first and foremost, one must squarely embrace the full complexity of a world posing ill-structured problems, and agree to dump unhelpful antiquarian tools. Second, to do this, a certain pragmatic mindset is crucial: one that is framed by a ‘mode of inquiry’ that embraces paradoxes, tolerates multiple perspectives, and indulges in experimentation and serious play with whatever quasi-analytical protocols may be at hand.⁴ Finally, in mapping out a workable approach to collaborative metagovernance, one must be neither overly optimistic nor overly pessimistic.⁵ Most often, collaboration will not emerge organically: one has to work hard at finding ways to use all the available physical and cognitive affordances that might help people to develop trust and empathy. This can be done by making the highest and best use of the mechanisms of reciprocity, instead of relying exclusively, as so many organizations try to do, on coercion and market incentives. However, it would be immensely counter-productive and untrue to presume that collaboration is not practically feasible.⁶

We will proceed in four stages.

First, we succinctly sketch the underlying conceptual framework that has guided our governance work up to now, and hint at the reasons why such a framework requires some modifications if it is to be of use in the construction of an inquiring system that requires cooperation triumphing over narrow self-interest.

³ Thomas Backer. 2003. *Evaluating Community Collaborations*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing, p. 10.

⁴ Michael Schrage. 2000. *Serious Play*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press; Roger Martin. 2007. *The Opposable Mind*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

⁵ Yochai Benkler. 2011. *The Penguin and the Leviathan*. New York: Crown Business.

⁶ Hayagreeva Rao and Robert Sutton. 2008. “The Ergonomics of Innovation,” *The McKinsey Quarterly*, September: 131-141; Martin A. Nowak. 2006. “Five Rules for the Evolution of Collaboration,” *Science*, 314 (December): 1560-1563.

Second, we make the case for inquiring systems as an assemblage of learning heuristics, and for the use of checklists as affordances, constituting crucial components in a protocol to design and operate a collaborative-metagovernance-based stewardship.

Third, we put forward a provisional checklist of crucial questions that could guide in the production of an effective inquiring system.

Fourth, we make a case for stewardship based on collaboration being neither impossible nor implausible, but rather demonstrably and pragmatically constructible if the powers of reciprocity are better understood and put to use.

In conclusion, we suggest some caution in experimenting with this instrument.

The underlying conceptual framework: sound, but in need of improvement

As discussed earlier in this volume, governance is effective coordination when power, resources, and information are widely distributed among a variety of stakeholders. It bridges silos across organizational sections, and bridges moments across time. A very stylized and succinct definition of this approach might be the study of the needed responses to coordinate and collaborate in the face of twin organizational pressures from within and without that emerge:

(1) in part as a reaction to the greater diversity within modern organizations and social systems themselves in terms of world views, systems of beliefs, and stakeholder capacities – a situation that makes the challenges of arriving at concerted organizational learning and collaborative metagovernance ever more daunting; and

(2) in part as a reaction to the greater diversity involved in complex and turbulent environments that forces organizations and social systems to adjust faster and more effectively to survive.

These forces have challenged the old Big ‘G’ Government approach to decision making (hierarchical, centralized, authoritarian, coercive) in all sectors (private, public, and social) in this new turbulent and pluralist world. As described previously, this is because, in our world, (a) nobody is able to fully take charge, and (b) there are no shared values that are agreed to by all stakeholders, that might serve as common reference points to guide such top-down decision making.

As a result, an alternative small ‘g’ governance approach (more pluralist, participative, horizontal and experimentalist) has emerged, that would appear to be better equipped to cope with these polycentric coordination challenges, and more capable of reconciling the variety of belief systems at play into a workable accommodation that takes full advantage of the dispersed information, resources and power, under the control of the different stakeholders. Under small ‘g’ governance, organizational and governance regimes are predominantly shaped by the dynamics of social learning which generate the needed coordination and collaboration arrangements through multiple, reflexive learning loops, that are capable of yielding innovation and resilience in an ongoing process of pragmatic value adding (in the broader sense of the term, not just economic).⁷

In the different terrains where this work has been carried out, a variety of principles and mechanisms have been used (and have proven effective) in designing an architecture of stewardship capable of fostering high-performance collaborative organizations and socio-economic systems: mechanisms such as maximum participation, true prices and costs, subsidiarity, competition, multi-stability, adequate negotiating forums, moral contracts, fail-safe mechanisms, etc.⁸

⁷ Gilles Paquet. 1999. *Governance Through Social Learning*. Ottawa: The University of Ottawa Press; Gilles Paquet. 1999. “Innovations in Governance in Canada,” *Optimum*, 29 (2/3): 71-81.

⁸ Gilles Paquet. 2008. *Gouvernance : mode d’emploi*. Montréal: Editions Liber; Christopher Wilson and Wayne Foster. *Reviewing COPSC: 11 Case Studies of Ontario Community Portals, Supplementary Report for, Reviewing COPSC: Building on the lessons of community portals*, a report prepared by Ruth Hubbard, Gilles Paquet and Christopher Wilson for the Ontario Ministry of Economic Development and Trade, Toronto, May 2006.

But even in the private, public and social spheres, where these principles and mechanisms have been experimented with, all too often collaborative behaviour has been too readily assumed to emerge as a matter of course.

Obviously, it is understood that mutualization and collaboration are essential ingredients for effective stewardship, that trust is its crucial lubricant, and that social learning by trial and error requires serious play with prototypes and experimentation of all sorts. However, our observation has been that too often there is little in the way of systematic protocols to probe how stewardship can be enacted and this process of production of collaboration stimulated.

Yet after so many terrains have been explored, and experiments carried out, it would appear timely to see if one might not be able to derive from such experiences not recipes, but a ‘protocol’ that could help in designing a path for grappling with the collaborative elements of collaborative metagovernance in an inquiring system, drawing on the mixed mechanisms already available.

Inquiring systems as heuristics and affordances

To be able to do so, one must first examine how the nature of an inquiring system is at the core of modern collaborative decentred metagovernance. We suggest that such a system may be characterized as a ‘collaborative search system’ that is capable of pulling together the diverse aspirations, knowledge, resources and authorities into a whole. In doing so, it provides the requisite stewardship for ensuring on-going commitments, learning, and experimentation; encourages direction-finding; creates resilience in the face of constant change; and contributes to innovation and productivity increases that will constitute value adding to society in the broadest sense.

Consistent with the traditional Newtonian view of cause and effect is the notion that ‘someone must be in charge’, causing some traditionalists to postulate nothing less than a

mechanical ‘Grand Designer’ that is omniscient, omnipotent, and capable of replacing the human messiness of political haggling and collaboration. Such a command-and-control engine is clearly at odds with the human realities of our complex and ever-changing world, where goals are unclear and the connections between ‘means’ and ‘ends’ unstable.⁹

Other groups, inspired by quantum perspectives, propose an approach, based less on goals and control, and more on intelligence and innovation – that embraces an intelligence-gathering function, the use of various search processes, that makes use of social learning processes of reframing and reflecting, and is primarily satisfied with keeping the organization’s collective dialogue within a certain corridor, defined by certain mutually agreed upon norms of acceptableness.¹⁰

This latter approach is a better fit, in our mind, with collaborative metagovernance, as it attempts to put in place an inquiring system based on an assemblage of mechanisms and practices of collaboration and social learning capable of bolstering the political process of collective decision making by affording it a capacity to *avoid avoidable mistakes*.

There may be a variety of ways to proceed along this latter path, but all such approaches can be stylized as proceeding in two stages:

- first, in the use of ‘fast and frugal heuristics’ (rules of thumb or other practical shortcuts that are consciously or unconsciously used by most practitioners) that can be customized for use by specific individuals and groups in specific circumstances; and,

⁹ Alycia Lee and Tatiana Glad. 2011. *Collaboration: The Courage to Step into a Meaningful Mess*. Amsterdam.collaboracy@the-hub.net, March.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Vickers. 1965. *The Art of Judgment*. London: Methuen; Harold L. Wilensky. 1967. *Organizational Intelligence*. New York: Basic Books. For example, this sort of approach has been used by Carl Taylor to gauge public policy options based on the answer to four probing questions: Is what is being proposed technically feasible? Is it socially acceptable? Is it implementable? Is it too politically destabilizing? Carl A. Taylor. 1997. “The ACIDD Test,” *Optimum* 27(4): 53-62.

- second, in the use of ‘affordances’ (like the checklists that have been successfully used by pilots for decades as part of their take-off and landing procedures) to help operationalize such heuristics.

Inquiring systems as assemblage of heuristics

An inquiring system is fundamentally about seeking and processing information as a sort of self-organized, direction-finding, ‘super automatic pilot’. It is designed to mop up information; to actively seek out anomalies and investigate identifiable pathologies; to explore problem definitions; to seek out potential collaborators; to generate testable prototypes of responses from conversations with those collaborators; to fail early and to fail often, using these prototypes, but also to learn quickly and thoroughly from each such experimentation; to disseminate the good and bad news about what has been learned; and to continuously close the knowing-doing gap within the organization or society. In this regard, an inquiring system meets the learning challenge of collaborative metagovernance by assembling the most appropriate heuristics to match problems with the existing context and available knowledge, resources and power capabilities in the least amount of time.

An inquiring system is not simply an evolving repository of knowledge or data, but it is also an evolving nexus of relationships among partners and contributors that is continually being transformed by the information being accumulated. Those relationships are not necessarily etched in MOUs or formal partnership agreements (as some would have us believe) but in the willing co-learning and value-adding exchanges that the relationships engender. Consequently, the various relationships (internal and external, quantitative and qualitative, functional and metabolic, etc.) are continually transforming both the intelligence-gathering processes and the implementing capabilities that they mediate. Yet the focus of an inquiring system must always remain in the corridor of the feasible – to ensure its outcomes are both desirable and viable, as defined by its relevant constraints, of which threat-avoidance is one.

As a result any inquiring system is naturally the result of a cumulative process of both learning and unlearning, especially when the partner interactions may cause a deconstruction of assumptions, frames and sense of what is possible. System outputs are subsequently compiled and acted upon through a self referential system of modification, development and redefinition over time. This learning and unlearning cycle is best facilitated by discovery engines that are frugal and flexible, that are based on learning by trial and error, and that have no guarantee of success in a world that is constantly changing.

For example, if someone has lost her pen in a room, she could work ‘backward’ from where she is, or start where she entered the room and work ‘forward’ until she finds it. Or if that does not work, she could ‘associate’ where she was when she last recalled having it. All these strategies are not as certain of producing results as the algorithmic approach of walking around the room in a grid search pattern, but the less certain heuristic approach is more likely to produce results much sooner.¹¹

Consequently, effective collaborative metagovernance will inevitably create and make use of a large repertoire of these fast and frugal heuristics as part of its inquiring system. The choice of heuristics is usually matched to particular issue domains and partnership features, allowing partners to compose an inquiring system that is both consistent with their capabilities and ecologically rational – i.e., well matched with their environment. Heuristics are made of combinations of skills, abilities, practices, techniques, or gimmicks which have become adopted because they are effective for those who use them. For instance, a ‘tit-for-tat’ heuristic,¹² comprised of the abilities to cooperate, to forgive,

¹¹ David Straus (*How to Make Collaboration Work Powerful Ways to Build Consensus, Solve Problems and Make Decisions*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2002) identifies dozens of such heuristics that are regularly used in the practice of collaboration. They are grouped into eight categories, and each heuristic is conceptualized as a pair of active verbs which represent alternatives, although not necessarily opposite, approaches to tackling the problem. For a review of those strategies, an examination of their powers and limitations, and some exercises demonstrating how the ability to make use of them can be developed, see David Straus. 1972. *Strategy Notebook: Tools for Change*. San Francisco: Interaction Associates.

¹² This is the well tested game theory heuristic of cooperating first, then imitating your partner’s last behaviour (cooperation or non-cooperation), while keeping in mind only their last move and forgiving all previous moves.

and to imitate,¹³ might be particularly useful among partners with low trust levels, but less useful among partners with long histories of cooperation.

In most metagovernance regimes, such practical abilities, skills and mechanisms are the critical factors for collaborative success. Consequently, ensuring that these abilities are in place and well developed must become an important feature of a successful inquiring system. Sadly, these cooperative abilities and skills are not commonly encouraged. However the growing need for effective collaboration is increasing both the demand for effective affordances and their value as they can help to stimulate the right and timely use of the necessary skills to facilitate more cooperative behaviour.

Affordances

Affordances are physical or cognitive devices designed to lower the cost of thinking; to create space for people think more clearly about things; to take collective decisions; and then to engage in joint action on that basis more easily. These are devices that afford certain action possibilities and not others. Such devices are meant to help focus individual and collective attention on key issues, and therefore expedite the use of appropriate heuristics in navigating the waters of shared commitment in partner management.¹⁴

As mentioned earlier, checklists are one very good example of what we mean by affordances: they are a fast and frugal way to focus the mind and attention on key issues. They do not provide answers or ways to generate answers, but they do ensure that key questions are asked. They are like the doors to a building. They provide access, but with no guarantee of finding what one is seeking or the means to find it once inside. In this way, they afford some effectiveness in coordination or collaboration in complex situations by ordaining that certain fundamental questions be addressed. Then, coupled

¹³ Gerd Gigerenzer. 2001. "The Adaptive Toolbox" in G. Gigerenzer and R. Selten, (eds). *Bounded Rationality – The Adaptive Toolbox*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, p. 37-50.

¹⁴ Ruth Hubbard and Gilles Paquet. 2010. *The Black Hole of Public Administration*. Ottawa: The University of Ottawa Press, p. 213-216.

with strategies to deal with such questions, they can afford support for collaborative governance, by strengthening the work of its inquiring system.

The effectiveness of checklists as a facilitator of collaboration has been demonstrated in many areas. Atul Gawande, for instance, documented the use of checklists for helping surgical teams to effectively and efficiently steward the collaborative activities of operating room teams.¹⁵

In practice, checklists tend to evolve as social learning progresses, and as new experiences and new contexts materialize. In the aircraft industry, for instance, manufacturers constantly update their cockpit checklists to reflect recent pilot and aviation industry experiences with the aircraft, together with new regulations. In fact, a publication date is stamped on all their checklists to ensure that only the most up-to-date version is used with each new flight.

The use of operating room checklists was itself inspired by the use of the same affordance by the aircraft pilots in the cockpit.

In closing this section since we have introduced a number of important new concepts, it might be useful to summarize our argument.

In the face of ever more complex, turbulent and novelty-generating contexts, collective decentred metagovernance aims at providing the requisite coordination through the evolution of inquiring systems that embrace intelligence and innovation by developing capacities for both social learning and collaboration. As tools of stewardship, inquiring systems stimulate collaborative wayfinding through a melange of mechanisms that make

¹⁵ Atul Gawande. 2009. *The Checklist Manifesto*. New York: Metropolitan Books. The results, when applied to the operating rooms, were phenomenal as revealed by the results of an eight-city pilot study that was carried out. Complications dropped by 36%, operating room deaths fell by 47%, infections originating in the operating room dropped by almost half (Gawande 2009: 154). Further, analyses of exit surveys of staff members coming out of surgery also helped uncover the key causal mechanism that explained why the checklist approach had been so successful. As it turned out, the key factor was that the use of checklists caused a significant increase in the level of communication among operating room collaborators.

the highest and best use of frugal heuristics which are in turn operationalized by affordances that help individuals or groups to focus their attention in certain ways, thereby affording certain action possibilities and not others.

Collaborative decentred metagovernance therefore utilizes the much more practical and pragmatic approach of stewardship, instead of the usual leadership, which arises as the product of an assemblage of inquiring systems. These inquiring systems are in turn made up of unique assortments of mechanisms, heuristics, rules of thumb, practices, and skill sets that foster wayfinding and collaboration in healthy environments of experimentation and serious play.

Collaborative decentred metagovernance represents more of an umbrella concept for defining the multiplex nature of the new shared governance model while stewardship is the process in which that shared governance becomes embodied and reified through processes of wayfinding and collaborative social learning. To return to our ‘super-automatic pilot’ metaphor, mechanisms, heuristics and affordances are the mechanical components involved in the exercise of stewardship in order to facilitate individuals and groups into building the requisite relationships, conducting their social learning, and implementing action together with minimal avoidable errors.

Collaborative metagovernance as inquiring systems

The practice of stewardship in collaborative decentred metagovernance, is, in essence, a complex orchestration of interacting inquiring systems: a set of processes to ensure effective coordination in the different sectors when power, resources and information are widely distributed. They are drawn from the whole arsenal of mechanisms developed around coercion, market exchanges, and reciprocity. The inquiring system is the means by which stewardship is enacted among participating partners to help shape collective purpose and performance. Stewardship therefore provides the collaborative glue that involves trust building, promoting shared authority and commitment, fostering co-learning, mediating joint decision making, and ensuring shared accountability, etc.

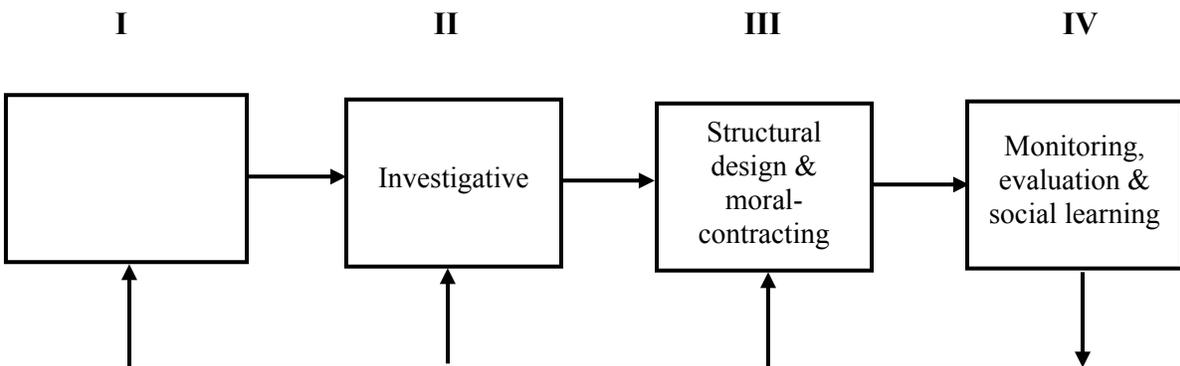
Inquiring systems may not be the same in each of the private, public and social spheres, nor in every issue domain, any more than the same style of coat is required to protect people from the elements. But in whatever sphere or issue domain a cooperative endeavour operates, there are common challenges that will confront the designers of inquiring systems as they are used to enable stewardship and achieve effective collaborative governance.

One can broadly outline the key stages in the development of collaborative metagovernance as responses to four questions:

- Does the situation need changing?
- What is the problem?
- How can we work together?
- How can we learn together and evaluate our progress?

These questions should allow the designer to fashion an approach to collaboration in four phases, as depicted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Four Phases for Designing Collaborative Governance



The first phase is primarily ‘observational and cognitive’: the particular issue domain is examined to determine its ‘fit’ with the mega-community involved.¹⁶ In the process, one would explore whether there are any detectable anomalies present; what features of the issue domains are salient; what causal mechanisms are at work; and who are the primary stakeholders (that hold such a significant amount of power, resources and information that they need to be profoundly involved in any process intent on designing or redesigning the collaborative governance regime).¹⁷

The second phase is ‘investigative’, focusing on defining the problem and the task at hand more precisely: the non-negotiable constraints imposed by the mega-community or by the ethos of the milieu;¹⁸ the nature of the value-adding anticipated; and the harms to be avoided, if at all possible, in the process of generating and implementing solutions. In this way, partners can begin contributing to the construction of the upper and lower bounds of what is to be accomplished (at best or minimally) by their work together. And simultaneously, they can begin identifying the nature and distribution of risks and other material, financial, human, psychic and emotional costs, together with the distribution of potential rewards and benefits, both tangible and intangible.

The third phase is a ‘structural-design-cum-moral-contracting’ phase that unfolds in two parallel, but intricately integrated sub-processes that identify how partners will work together, while putting in place the necessary social capital to support that work.

The first sub-process concerns the development of the institutional/organizational structures (legal, informational, etc.) that will ensure that the necessary rules of the game required for any collaboration are viable. This also concerns the choice of instruments, arrangements, and affordances that will be necessary to foster social learning sufficiently to allow at least a modicum of chance of early successes, and provide a foundation for future, more ambitious achievements.

¹⁶ Mark Gerencser et al. 2008. *Megacommunities*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁷ Operating under the principle of inclusivity, less significant stakeholders could also be involved but in a less profound and significant way and at times of their choosing.

¹⁸ As in the case of Carl Taylor’s four norms to gauge public policies.

The second sub-process – working in parallel – concerns trust conventions and moral contracts, but also legal arrangements and incentive-reward systems that need to be put in place to mobilize the willing collaboration of all the significant stakeholders, and to ensure that the requisite *affectio societatis*¹⁹ is developed, so that the collaborative behaviours can last as long as needed.

While the first sub-process defines the structures through which the collaborative activities can flow, the second sub-process encourages a culture of collaboration and trust.

The fourth phase is an ‘evaluative and social learning’ one: it focuses not strictly on outputs and outcomes (as some might expect in summative evaluations of goals-and-control style approaches), but also on whether the processes of generating collective intelligence and innovation functions have performed well, and whether the collaborative relationships have been sustained and strengthened. For instance, while the transformation of a complex socio-economic system may take some time to generate summative results, building and maintaining positive partner and stakeholder relationships represents a prerequisite for the future outputs from their collaborative interaction and therefore its presence represents a clear interim measure of progress.

This emphasis on transformative capacity (i.e., co-learning and progressivity), and on the changes in the stakeholders’ attitudes and behaviours, allows stakeholders to consciously improve both the processes and outcomes of their work together.²⁰

¹⁹ This is a French legal concept in Latin garb that means that two or more people personally and jointly commit themselves to achieving the purpose(s) of their association. French courts have added to objective partnership criteria an indispensable subjective one: the presence of a “spirit of cooperation” among the partners or *affectio societatis*, which defines their willingness to pursue their goals together. Lack of *affectio societatis* is a sufficient condition for the partnership to be dissolved (Vincent Cuisinier. 2008. *L’affectio societatis*. Montpellier: LITEC).

²⁰ Jamie A.A. Gamble. 2008. *A Developmental Evaluation Primer*. Montreal: The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation; Michael Quinn Patton. 2010. *Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use*. New York: Guilford Publications.

Lastly in this fourth phase, there must be additional (though not necessarily formal) mechanisms of conflict resolution to bridge the differences of opinion and interpretation that will inevitably emerge. These, together with fail-safe mechanisms, in case those differences prove irreconcilable, will help provide an antidote for uncooperative behaviours. One, however, should not neglect the potential for sabotage and conflict, and the social traps that may lie beneath the surface of any collaborative venture.²¹ There is a danger that behind polite discourse there are threats to the social learning process and even to the organization or the social system.

Installing these safeguards is meant to protect the inquiring system from being derailed or locked – by preventing social traps from any blocking the gingering of the social learning cycle. The forms of these safeguards may differ (‘fail-safe’ when the probability of failing is predictably low, and ‘safe-fail’ when the probability of failing is very high), but they play a key role in sustaining the learning cycle and, consequently, in the usefulness of the monitoring-evaluation phase.

These four basic phases of collaboration design lead us to consider four sets of stylized questions that are likely to confront any designer of an inquiring system who attempts to steward a collaborative organization or a socio-technical system.

In the graph below, each of the columns aligns with the four phases in designing collaborative governance, and is itself the locus of a large number of related questions. Each of the columns is also the source of an array of fast and frugal rules of thumb and affordances that can be designed to provide answers to these questions as well as many others.

As new information becomes available or new circumstances materialize, the constant process of inquiry fuels the cycle of social learning, innovation, shared commitment and mutual accountability. The checklist of questions presented above is meant to help

²¹ Bo Rothstein. 2005. *Social Traps and the Problem of Trust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

kickstart the process of defining the burden of office for each key stakeholder in the collaborative metagovernance process, and afford them the opportunity to reflect on guiding assumptions, structures, technology, or even the theory of what the ‘collective enterprise’ is all about.

Figure 2. Provisional checklist of questions

I Does the situation need changing?	II What is the problem?	III How will you work together?	IV How will you learn together & evaluate your progress?
1. Are there any detectable anomalies?	6. What is the task at hand?	<i>a. DESIGN</i>	12. What feedback & informational loops do you have to enable social learning
2. What are the salient features of the issue domain?	7. What are the non-negotiable constraints within the mega-community?	10. What instruments of collaboration and social learning can you use to produce short term success and long term commitment?	13. What collective learning processes do you have in place?
3. What are the causal mechanisms at play?	8. Who are the stakeholders that must be included and how will you involve them?	<i>b. CONVENTIONS</i>	14. How will you gauge ongoing performance objectively?
4. Can this be resolved by a single actor?	9. What are the risks and potential rewards, and how will these be aligned among the various partners?	11. What are the conventions & moral contracts that need to be negotiated to maintain a culture of collaboration?	15. How will you gauge changes in attitudes & behaviours among partners?
5. Who are the key stakeholders?			16. How will you resolve conflicts?
			17. What safe-fail mechanisms are in place?
			18. At what point would you dissolve the collaboration?

As Donald Schön has shown, theory, structure and technology are in constant interaction in any social system or organization, and social learning may proceed either well or not, depending on the degree of misalignment among the three.²² Both Figure 1 and Figure 2 are presented as an illustration of a budding inquiring system likely to trigger social learning and generate collective intelligence and knowledge at three levels: among individual stakeholders, within particular inquiring systems, and among inquiring systems within the collaborative metagovernance.

While it is important to note that although each phase is important, phase IV is possibly the most important (and therefore the questions attached to this phase are more crucial) because it determines the tonus of the social learning cycle: the more robust, open, and ‘developmental’ phase IV is, the more vibrant the learning and therefore the inquiring system. Moreover, the more attention given to ‘relational learning’, the more likely it is that the learning cycle will not become impaired.

Stewardship: self-governance, collibration and collaboration

The processes of inquiring, social learning and ‘wayfinding’ are underpinned by the collaborative mechanisms that are essential ingredients provided by effective stewardship. But stewardship is not the only source of collaboration. There are, in fact, several.

Sometimes collaboration emerges from self-organization and self-governance, combined with the dynamics of environment and context. It has been shown by Elinor Ostrom and her team, for instance, that this is not only possible but that there is empirical evidence that individuals and groups can develop credible commitments without relying on external authorities.²³ This does not mean that there will always be collaboration, but the Hobbesian prediction that there will be no cooperation – ever – is untenable. It has been

²² Donald A. Schön. 1971. *Beyond the Stable State*. New York: Norton.

²³ Elinor Ostrom et al. 1992. “Covenants with and without a Sword: Self-governance is possible,” *The American Political Science Review*, 86(2): 404-417.

shown that, with sufficient information, in an arena where authentic dialogue can occur, together with some monitoring and sanctioning, collaboration can resolve major ‘tragedies-of-the-commons-type’ problems and other collective challenges.²⁴

Moreover, there is the possibility for key institutional partners (or even peripheral ones) at certain moments (as part of their burden of office) to intervene through *bricolage* to catalyze these more organic processes, and to use whatever capacity they may have opportunistically and temporarily to ‘collibrate’, i.e., to tinker with these self-governance processes and to nudge the organization or the social system into a preferred direction faster. This is not a unique privilege of the state: any partner may have the opportunity to do so on occasion, even if there is no necessity for it to happen. It is the transitory nature of this type of intervention that distinguishes it from the on-going acts of stewardship.

More important, in terms of stewardship, is the possibility of collaboration to allow networks to crystallize into communities of practice, capable of generating cooperation that is neither a result of market incentives or external coercion, but is a result of various forces rooted in reciprocity. The case has been made quite persuasively that cooperation and collaboration do work, and are effective in contexts where traditional management fails, and that even mass collaboration is not only possible, but demonstrably successful.²⁵ The question, then, is to consider how to ensure that the highest and best use is made of self-organization and of designing for cooperation – through the various collaborative mechanisms of communication, reframing, conventions and moral contracts, and, most importantly, through the application of developmental evaluation.²⁶

Developmental evaluation focuses on *ex ante* performance preview rather than on *ex post* performance review. It is well adjusted to experimentation and serious play with prototypes, and contributes meaningfully to an acceleration of the process of social learning, and on-going ‘wayfinding’. It is based on real-time emergent evaluation, and it

²⁴ Adam Kahane. 2004. *Solving Tough Problems*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

²⁵ Yochai Benkler. 2011. *The Penguin and the Leviathan*; Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams. 2006. *Wikinomics*. New York: Portfolio.

²⁶ See Yochai Benkler. 2011 *The Penguin and the Leviathan*, chapter 10, and also Michael Quinn Patton. 2011. *Developmental Evaluation*. New York: The Guilford Press.

is geared to accompany and catalyze on-going development, to adjust general principles to new contexts, to the development of rapid responses, and to deal with major changes like ‘black swan’ events²⁷. Developmental evaluation is a major driver of the sort of apparatus required at the monitoring and learning stage of the reflective process described in box IV in Figure 2 – the portion of the process that is pivotal in social learning.

This catalytic function of stewardship depends fundamentally on harnessing the genetic-cultural evolution of human reciprocity instead of relying exclusively on self-interest and coercion.²⁸ But the mix of forms of collaboration (more or less explicit, more or less dependent on common knowledge, synchronicity or the like) will depend on the context, and so will the relative importance of design and *bricolage* in relation to the forces of self-governance. What is clear is that the automatic pilot needs to rely on the human propensity to collaborate as well as incentives to do so, and to-date these have been ignored to a greater extent than they should have been.

A word of warning

The key rationale behind the use of a checklist as an affordance of collaborative metagovernance is that not only do governance failures occur, but that such failures are ‘bound to’ occur as they do in most human activities.²⁹

This means that putting in place casual fail-safe mechanisms in case collaboration does not work will not suffice, in and of themselves. Such fail-safe precautions presume that cooperative arrangements or complex policies will generally work: they are included to deal with the most unlikely event that collaboration might fail. Accordingly, the work to develop mature collaborative structures and cultures is not taken very seriously.

²⁷ Black swan evenets refer to events which are statistical outliers – surprises – but which nevertheless have a large role in influencing subsequent history, eg. the events of September 11, 2001.

²⁸ Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis. 2011. *A Cooperative Species – Human Reciprocity and its Evolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

²⁹ Paul Ormerod. 2005. *Why Most Things Fail*. London: Faber & Faber; Henry Petroski. 2006. *Success Through Failure – The Paradox of Design*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

If one were to presume that in all likelihood things *will* fail at some point, (a presumption consistently supported by experience) then one has to shift from a ‘fail-safe’ to a ‘safe-fail’ approach, where attention is directed towards catching the quasi-certain or highly probable failures as soon as possible, in order to minimize the damages that are bound to occur.³⁰

From this perspective, the main contribution of affordances is in the prevention of harms that could result from failed partnerships, un-integrated or too narrowly defined policies, under- or un-utilized resources, and a wasteful adversarial environment – all echoes of poor collaborative metagovernance.

As an additional caution, accepting the challenge of being guided by an inquiring system does not mean that one should abandon oneself to the caprices of this system. Any experiment (including that of an inquiring system) entails vigilance, and some capacity to resort to nudging action, if and when the inquiring system gives signs of acting in an untoward manner. Yet our observation is that experimentation and prototyping are not a regular feature of traditional governing styles. This reluctance to experiment will only be overcome if there is a culture of experimentation that becomes commonly accepted, and if the notion of affordances as guides is accompanied by assurances that any missteps resulting from experimentation will not lead to the usual blame game, but to organizational learning and quick, corrective action.

Yet even if such a culture existed, we suspect it would be insufficient for the incremental successes with inquiring systems to offset the prevalence of risk aversion that is so pervasive and endemic, particularly in the public sector. For that to occur, we suspect that there will have to be some re-assurance made to those claiming the mantle of leadership that disaster will not be an outcome of these sorts of experiments in social learning. Happily, one of the major advantages of inquiring systems is that as processes which

³⁰ C.S. (Buzz) Holling. 1976. “Resilience and Stability of Ecosystems” in Eric Jantsch, C.H. Waddington, (eds). *Evolution and Consciousness in Transition*. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, p. 73-92.

comprise robust, continuous vigilance they are much more likely to catch very small variations in real time, before they evolve into major catastrophes. And so even for those who may be quite risk averse, small experiments with the design of collaborative metagovernance can yield potentially significant benefits.

Anderson and Simister have further suggested that there are rules for running such experiments that can help give the process even more legitimacy and support. They suggest:

- focusing on individuals and thinking short-term to begin with;
- trying unusual, ‘out of the box’ thinking;
- measuring from the outset, as much as possible, anything that matters;
- being on the lookout for natural experiments of the type that the environment is constantly turning out.

In other words, they suggest that partner vigilance has to be active and on-going in order to identify what is working, or what could potentially work, in any endeavour supported by social learning.³¹

Yet as a steward, one would also have to be vigilant and on the lookout for any obstacles or barriers that may present themselves in the way of establishing an inquiring system – obstacles that may emerge either from without or within the organization or the socio-economic system. The more alert these monitoring mechanisms are, the sooner any anomaly can be detected, and, therefore, the faster corrective adjustments can be nudged. This will result in a more effective inquiring system that can act as the engine of good collaborative metagovernance.

It would seem that this etiquette of active and defensive alertness, therefore, serves as the underlying characteristic of inquiring systems, and as the most important capacity of a ‘safe-fail’ apparatus.

³¹ Eric T. Anderson and Duncan Simister. 2011. “A step-by-step guide to smart business experiments,” *Harvard Business Review*, 89(3): 98-105.

Conclusion

So far, in all the fields where they have been used, heuristics, checklists, and other affordances, etc. have been developed primarily by practitioners and from experience over time. They evidently do not need to be theorized first. Indeed, this effort to produce or invent affordances is a common thread emerging from the experience of various practitioners.

While we have attempted to paint a conceptual landscape of inquiring systems and affordances, the real test comes in the field. We have also tried to identify a checklist as collaborative affordance. But, at the moment, all this can be regarded as only a skeletal and indicative prototype. Before such a prototype can be realistically applied in a particular issue domain, there is much in terms of flesh, blood, nerves, muscles, etc., that will have to be added to this skeleton through extensive practitioner conversations.

The same must be said about the design of families of inquiring systems that may be adjusted to particular issue domains: the road to collaborative decentred metagovernance is bound to be paved with inquiring systems and affordances, but much work remains to be done before the new paradigm is fully operational.³²

³² Gilles Paquet. 2007. "Organization Design as Governance's Achilles' Heel," *www.governancia.com*, 1(3): 1-11.